

Was "Sex-pol" a movement?

by Andreas Peglau¹

For a better understanding of the following text, it is recommended to read first [The Unified Associations for Proletarian Sexual Reform and Maternity Protection and Wilhelm Reich's real role in the German „Sex-pol“](#).

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Even before Reich moved from Norwegian exile to the U.S. in 1939, the final failure of what Reich had called the "Sex-Pol movement" had occurred. The reasons for this were, on the one hand, harassment by the Norwegian authorities and defamation by various media and academics in the country. In addition, there were internal conflicts within the Norwegian sex-pol group and some elitist ideas of Reich. For example, he wanted only those who had been trained by him in character analysis to be considered "core troops" of the movement. Already when Reich planned the work program for the following year in the summer of 1937, the "Sex-Pol" was no longer mentioned.

But does what was disintegrating there really deserve the title "movement"?

A text Reich published in 1934 in his *Zeitschrift für politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie* (Journal of Political Psychology and Sexual Economics) stated, "The history of the Sex-Pol movement begins with experiences at Viennese sex counseling centers in 1926/30" (Reich 1934, pp. 262f.).

The further text suggests that this led to a German Sex-Pol movement that he both initiated and led in terms of content. Since, moreover, the entire journal repeatedly dealt with current undertakings or standpoints of "the Sex-Pol," reading it gives the impression that this movement ultimately also gained a foothold in Scandinavia. In particular, by retroactively labeling his earlier activities, including those in the *Einheitsverbände für proletarische Sexualreform und Mutterschutz* (Unified Associations for Proletarian Sexual Reform and Maternity Protection, UA), as the Sex-Pol movement, Reich gave the impression of a development marked by continuity.

Decades later, an anonymous author would then collocate the "Sex-Pol" story as follows:

"As early as 1928, Reich had built up the Movement for Sexual Economy and Politics (Sex-Pol) out of his realization that fascism could not be stopped by the political and organizational means of the CPs and SPs [...]. This saw itself as a group within the communist workers' movement. With this movement in Austria he was exposed to such strong social, psychological and political pressure (inside and outside the KPÖ)² that he was forced to move to Berlin. There he rebuilt the Sex-Pol. [...] In the Danish emigration he again tried to build up the Sex-Pol."

¹ Abridged, slightly changed and translated excerpt from ["Unpolitische Wissenschaft? Wilhelm Reich und die Psychoanalyse im Nationalsozialismus,"](#) 2017, pp. 322-328. There you find also much more sources.

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Please note: My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with [DeepL](#) and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de

² KPÖ = Kommunistische Partei Österreichs.

What was the reality?

On Dec. 27, 1928, the Viennese authorities recognized the Socialist Society for Sexual Counseling and Sexual Research, initiated to a large extent by Reich and the sexual reformer Marie Frischauf, as an association. According to the statutes, anyone "who professes the socialist worldview" could become a member. In addition, the anchoring of the counseling and research activities in psychoanalysis was emphasized several times. In the society's six counseling centers, Reich and nine other "leftist" physicians and analysts, as well as a lawyer and a teacher, conducted about 700 counseling sessions between 1929 and 1930. In addition, they organized at least seven, apparently well-attended, lecture and discussion evenings and published the writings *Sexualerregung und Sexualbefriedigung* and *Ist Abtreibung schädlich?* by Marie Frischauf and Annie Reich.

But were they already a "movement" with these? The political scientist Felix Kolb defines a social movement as a "network" of

"organizations and individuals that, on the basis of a shared collective identity, seeks to bring about, resist, or reverse social, political, economic, or cultural change through predominantly noninstitutionalized tactics" (Kolb 2002, p. 10).

The Socialist Society for Sexual Counseling and Sexual Research offered as its collective identity the Reich-typical combination of Marxist and psychoanalytic insights and the joint commitment to making them available through counseling and public relations work, especially to poorer sections of the population. This society was also well networked: all its events were advertised in the *Wiener Rote Fabne*,³ as were its counseling centers; Reich was a member of the SPÖ, at least seven of the ten counselors were or became members of the KPÖ, six were analysts or were very close to analysis.

But how many people participated beyond that? No more precise information can be gleaned from the available documents, including Reich's own report. Even Karl Fallend, who has made a thorough study of Reich's activities in Vienna, had to leave "largely open" the question of "to what extent the S[ozialistische] G[esellschaft] succeeded in winning broader circles of the left for cooperation" (Fallend 1988, p. 117).

Let us therefore ask differently: what minimum number of people would a "movement" have to link together? Perhaps a comparison will help. Sigmund Freud, certainly referring to the founding of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) at that time, spoke of a "psychoanalytic movement" roughly for the period beginning in 1910. At that time, however, the IPA had only 53 members. In favor of letting this count as a movement is - besides the collective identity as psychoanalysts and the endeavor to change the human self-image - that there were also effective effects to the outside, various cooperations, thus a "network".

To believe that the Socialist Society for Sexual Counseling and Sexual Research also has about 50 members seems realistic to me. Such a public-oriented association, which addressed all "leftists", must have had some popularity in the "Red Vienna" of that time. Assuming this, the Viennese network dominated by Reich must be granted the character of a regional movement.

However, neither former Viennese comrades-in-arms nor supporters accompanied him to Berlin at the end of 1930. Here he picked up where he left off in Vienna, but in organizational terms it was almost a completely new beginning. In addition, Reich joined an already existing movement, namely that of the communist German workers.

³ Newspaper of the KPÖ.

The UA can also be understood as a component of this movement, which can only be described as "institutionalized" to a limited extent. But were the UA a Reich movement? Certainly not. Even if Reich was initially the decisive source of ideas for their content: for the KPD, the Düsseldorf UA⁴ and its offshoots had a completely different task from the one Reich had in mind from the very beginning.

Obviously, however, Reich was soon surrounded by committed comrades-in-arms such as the pedagogue Fritz Hupfeld, the psychoanalyst Edith Jacobssohn and listeners of the Marxist Workers School MASCH. If one considers that at a UA meeting in 1933 as many as 32 of 71 present rejected resolutions against Reich, one can conclude that the pro-Reich faction of the UA must have had considerable size and strength.

Given the presumed total of 12,000 members of all UAs, this minority must have numbered several hundred. An assessment by Luise Dornemann, the secretary of the Düsseldorf UA (who was politically „true to the line“ of the KP), suggests that these individuals were concentrated in the Berlin region in particular: "We had an uphill struggle there against the Berlin group, who [...] carried tendencies of psychoanalysis and sexual reform into this organization".

Since Reich, as already explained, was certainly not only referring to the association when he spoke of "movement", a larger number of people who were not UA members must also be counted among this circle - which is also evidenced by various letters Reich collected from this time in his archives.

In this respect, it seems justified to me to speak of a well-connected Reichian or sexual-economic movement within and outside the total of the UAs.

In Scandinavian exile, Reich was only able to gather a few around him as the new core of "the Sex-Pol"; but again, these were consistently different people than before in Germany. He himself spoke for 1934 of "about twenty very clever, trained, dear ones", others in 1936 still only of a "small group of specialists".

The results they achieved, however, were enormous. Not only with the *Zeitschrift für politische Psychologie und Sexualökonomie* they demonstrably have an effect on other currents and circles. In 1935, Reich could already list as successes: the "well-organized publishing house with partly even, partly increasing sales," the "Sex-pol Fund" from permanent contributions and donations, "international connections to comrades and institutions in almost all countries" with the exception of "India, China, Japan, Bulgaria, Italy," as well as to various communist parties, to the Socialist Workers' Party SAP (of which Willy Brandt, a friend of Reich, was a member), the Trotskyists, the West European Freethinkers' Movement, the radical Social Democrats and anarcho-syndicalists. "Sex-Pol" literature such as *Der sexuelle Kampf der Jugend* (The sexual struggle of youth) had already been "translated or in translation" into several languages. The network that emerged around Reich in Scandinavia was thus a small but extremely effective supranational movement.

In this sense, there were *three* "Sex-Pol movements" that were almost entirely different in terms of personnel, but largely built on each other in terms of content, and each led by Reich: one Viennese, one German, and one Scandinavian movement.

All three deserve the title "movement", but one cannot speak of continuity in a more comprehensive sense.

The only "bracket" that held Reich's sexual-political activities together over the entire period between 1928 and 1937 was himself and his intense interest in the subject, to which he remained faithful in various countries and organizational forms.

⁴ That was the first of the UAs, founded on 2 May 1931.

The considerable resonance that he and his respective comrades-in-arms achieved with it accordingly ebbed away quickly after Reich left or had to leave the country or region. He did not succeed in launching a sustainable sexual-political movement independent of himself.

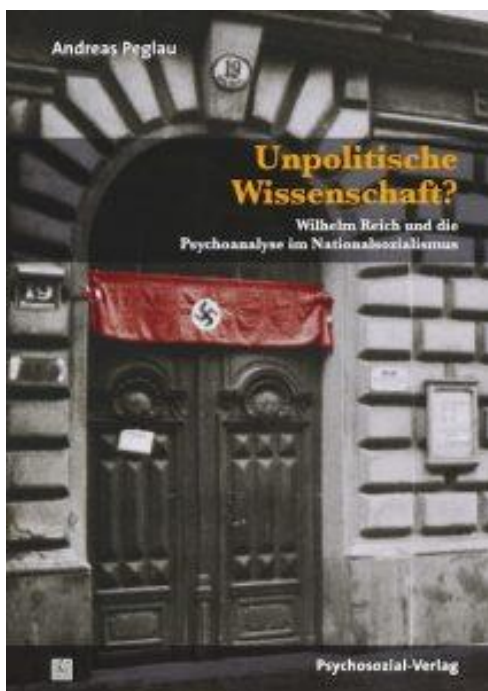
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